

store, temple, and train station. In fact, January 4, usually a cold and dismal winter's day in Japan, is one of the most colorful days of the Japanese year; everywhere you look, you see the brightly colored kimonos that young women are wearing for the first-day-of-business pep rally at the office. One March morning—it was the first day of the Chinese New Year festivities—in the Choa Chu Kang subway station in Singapore, I saw a horde of conductors, platform attendants, ticket takers, and sweeper-uppers in dark blue Mass Rapid Transit System uniforms, gathered in a big circle around the station chief. This hyperenergetic gentleman was leading a sort of pep rally to encourage all subway workers to put out their greatest effort during the busy holiday season. “We will serve the people of Singapore!” the head honcho was shouting. “We will guarantee their safe passage! On schedule! With no accidents! We will serve the people!” The assembled workers responded with a roar reminiscent of a football team charging out to win the Super Bowl.

START ★

When our daughters started at Yodobashi No. 6 Elementary School, the principal, Abe-sensei, held an all-school ceremony to mark the important occasion of these young foreign girls joining the Yodobashi community. The entire student body paraded into the gymnasium, with the student leaders of each class scurrying around in a desperate but futile effort to make sure the lines were straight and everybody was marching in step. The students sat Indian-style on the floor in their not-so-straight lines. They sang that peppy school song—the one about the nonexistent view of Mount Fuji—and then moved directly into another musical offering, a song in English called “Hello, My Friend,” which they had all learned just so they could sing it to my daughters. Then the principal stood up and announced that some new students were joining Yodobashi that day: “Please let me introduce Keito-chahn”—that is, Dear Little Kate—“and Eh-reen-chahn,” or Dear Little Erin. Dear Little Kate and Dear Little Erin stood meekly before their new schoolmates, who erupted into a vigorous outburst of greetings and cheers. “Keito-chahn will be in fifth grade, second section,” Abe-sensei continued, “and everyone in that class will be her friend. But her first friend will be Makiko.” At that point, little Makiko, wearing a denim skirt and a sweatshirt that said “Let’s Surfing Waikiki,” took Kate Reid by the hand and led her out of the gym

toward classroom 5-2. Another "first friend" was announced for Erin Reid, and she, too, was taken by the hand and led off to her second-grade classroom. As they walked out of the gym, the Yodobashi students launched into another heartfelt chorus of "Hello, My Friend."

It was, at least to the bemused American parents standing at the back of the gym, a completely charming—indeed, moving—event, the more so because we never expected the whole school to turn out to greet our daughters. At first, I thought this gathering was part of Abe-sensei's anti-*ijime* strategy, to make sure she could deliver on her promise that my girls would never be subjected to bullying. When I suggested this, the principal gave me that look of hers, the one that suggested I must have just stepped off the spaceship from Mars. The ceremony had nothing to do with *ijime*, she said. It was simply the natural thing to do. When new students came to Yodobashi No. 6, an all-school ceremony had to be held to mark this important moment in the life of the community. Any fool knew that.

Of the countless ceremonies held regularly in Japan, my favorite was Seijin-shiki, the Coming-of-Age Ceremony, held annually on January 15. On that date each year, all the Japanese who will turn twenty during the year are toasted and honored in official ceremonies during which they are officially recognized as adult citizens of Japan, with all the rights and all the many responsibilities appurtenant thereto. This is considered so important that January 15 is a national holiday in Japan—Seijin no Hi, or Coming-of-Age Day. Every city, town, and rural hamlet in the country—about 3,200 jurisdictions in all—gathers its newly minted adults into the town hall or school auditorium for a combination reunion/party/lecture. The Coming-of-Age Ceremony is one of the chief means of inculcating the national sense of responsibility that helps make the country polite, civil, and safe.

Given the importance that Asian societies assign to concepts like honoring rules and recognizing a personal responsibility to advance the good of the group, it's not terribly surprising that Japan would take this opportunity to teach the lesson to impressionable young people on the threshold of adult life. What is surprising is that most of the young people actually show up.

Attendance at the Seijin-shiki is voluntary. Since schools, colleges, and offices are all closed for the holiday, January 15 is a perfect time

for twenty-year-olds to hit the ski slopes or head out to the races, where they are, as of that day, old enough to place a bet, smoke cigarettes, and buy a drink legally. (Actually, the legal drinking age is not that much of a milestone for young Japanese, because there are vending machines everywhere selling beer, wine, sake, scotch, and bourbon. They offer ubiquitous opportunities for teen drinking. The machines all bear a sticker that reads as follows: "We respectfully request that honorable customers under the age of twenty demonstrate reserve about purchasing alcoholic beverages." But when you walk past these machines, it is often obvious that some thirsty teenagers fail to demonstrate the necessary reserve.) In fact though, most of the new adults show up at the local town hall for the ceremony. About two million people turn twenty each year in Japan, and roughly 70 percent of them take their seats on January 15 at the local Seijin-shiki.

I used to show up, too, every January 15, just to watch how the new members were inducted into Japanese society. It was, not surprisingly, our neighbor Matsuda-san—a man who spent a lot of time trying to inculcate that feeling of membership in me—who first told me about the Coming-of-Age Ceremony. "They don't have anything like this in America, do they?" he said. "You ought to go over there on the morning of the fifteenth." And I did—partly to see what happens at a Coming-of-Age Ceremony, and partly to try to figure out why any teenager would voluntarily attend such an event.

The gathering for new *seijin* from our section of Tokyo, Shibuya Ward, was held in the Shibuya Public Auditorium, another of those lavish glass-and-chrome public facilities built in the 1980s, when the country seemed to have more money than it knew what to do with. There's a sunken plaza outside the Shibuya Public Auditorium, with a ghastly statue of twisted beams and stained glass in the center and a big stone plaque explaining how the people of Shibuya Ward had built this handsome structure to enhance the common good. When I arrived, the plaza was swarming with thousands of twenty-to-be's, flirting, smoking, soaking up the bright winter sun, and showing off their new clothes. The crowd was split just about evenly between boys and girls, but the females stole the show. They were dressed, almost to a woman, in lavishly embroidered kimonos of brilliant coloring: orange, lavender, crimson, dark green, pink, splattered with specu-

~~society's traditions.~~ * Even if people don't have any idea where the values came from, they are constantly reminded—at work, at school, waiting for a subway, driving down the street, turning on the television—that the ancient moral rules still apply. In Western societies, the job of transmitting moral norms is left largely to churches, families, educational organizations, and the like. In Asia, moral values are considered too important to be left to the private sector. The whole community, public and private, takes part in teaching values, and the teaching never stops.

You can see the results, in large ways and small, in the Confucian societies today. Those dramatically low crime rates, the low rates of divorce, unwed motherhood, broken homes, drug use, vandalism, etc., are testament to the fact that moral directives about obeying the law, honoring the family, and respecting fellow members of the community still have potent force in Asian societies. In our daily life in Asia, our family saw the results in the safe, clean streets and the civil, courteous tone of daily life. We could see the lingering power of the old moral directives in smaller segments of life as well—things like the success of smokeless cigarettes and the outcry against public kissing.

American tobacco companies introduced several new cigarette brands in the early 1990s which were designed to deal with the problem of second-hand smoke and the annoyance a cigarette causes for nearby nonsmokers. One innovation, sold under the label "Salem Preferred," used special chemicals in the cigarette paper to make the tobacco produce less smoke, and make the smoke smell less like tobacco. Another idea was R. J. Reynolds's inventive but doomed "smokeless" cigarette, "Eclipse," which used a chemical heat plug to heat up the tobacco and create a sense of smoking with no need to light a match. In the United States, both products were sorry flops; smokers found it was hard to suck any flavor out of them, and the flavor was pretty bad when they succeeded.

But the tobacco firms' investment was not a complete loss. They shipped the technology across the Pacific. In the Asian countries (particularly Japan, where people love both tobacco and technology) both the low-smoke and the "smokeless" varieties have become big market hits, selling under labels like "Pianissimo," "Frontier Pure," and "Airs." The head of R. J. Reynolds's Japan operation explained that

these new cigarettes caught on because they "appeal to traditional values in Japanese society, such as a focus on harmony and respect for others." Even when they step out on the corner for a smoke, in other words, people feel the need to "try not to do anything that might bother the other people."

While we were living in Tokyo, in the mid-nineties, we observed one of the stranger manifestations of the lingering strength of traditional values in modern Asian societies. Japan went into a mild panic over kissing.

A few trendy magazines in Japan, followed in short order by the mainstream newspapers, the TV newsmagazines, and eventually the entire nation, decided that members of the younger generation—high school and college kids, plus young working people—were actually kissing each other in public. Yes, you read it right: A guy and a gal in their twenties, returning to her apartment after a date, would actually exchange a good-night kiss right out there on the sidewalk. Or at least, that's what the media reported. Duly alerted, our family started looking for evidence of this shocking behavior, but it was hard to find. Seeing a kiss in public is not an everyday thing in Japan. It's not even an every-week thing. But now and then, particularly late at night, we might catch a glimpse of a smooching couple on the doorstep, or the train platform, or in a corner booth at a downtown restaurant. This was officially declared to be shocking. A well-known social critic, Aso Chiaki, wrote a long exposé of the new trend—"it's disgusting," she concluded—in *Shukan Yomiuri*, a generally serious newsmagazine. She reported that others had reported to her that there were instances of outright necking on the trains. Nobody I know ever saw that.

In a homogeneous nation where everybody gets excited about the same thing at the same time, this alleged trend became serious media fodder. Among other things, it became a running subplot on one of Japan's great TV soap operas, *Tokyo University Story*. Despite the name, this is a high school drama; it is essentially an Asian version of the American hit show *Beverly Hills 90210*, although it presents a vastly more innocent picture of high school life. Unlike the students of *90210*, whose problems tend to revolve around drug deals, cheating on tests, and which high school junior is sleeping with whom, the basic tension of the Japanese melodrama is whether two seniors—the

attractive mini-skirted Haruka and her handsome boyfriend, Murakami—can study hard enough to pass the entrance exam for Tokyo University, Japan's most prestigious college.

Right in the middle of the national kissing-in-public scare, young Haruka let herself get so aroused in one episode of the show that she permitted Murakami to kiss her, in a public park! There followed a long period of suspense and anguish, focusing on Haruka's fear that Murakami might tell the guys in school what had happened, thus destroying her reputation. As it turned out, Murakami's lips were sealed, which made Haruka love him all the more. (And, yes, both did eventually pass the test for Tokyo U.)

Two things about this "trend," and the reaction to it, were baffling. In the first place, I'm still not convinced that it was ever real. Our family, as noted, had trouble spotting a public kiss even when we were looking for it. In my role as a journalist, I asked a lot of people about this phenomenon and rarely found anybody who had kissed in public (or would admit to it). The Shiseido cosmetics company, which is Japan's largest seller of lipstick, and thus would appear to have a professional interest in kissing, public or private, commissioned an opinion poll. Of four hundred Japanese men surveyed, 71 percent had never kissed a woman, wife or otherwise, in a public place. Of the 29 percent who admitted to kissing at train stations, airports, or street corners, more than half said they were embarrassed about it and probably wouldn't do it again.

The other disconcerting point about the kissing-in-public issue was that kissing seemed decidedly tame compared to the stuff anybody could find in some of the raunchier Japanese magazines or even late-night television. One of the Japan network shows that ran after midnight each Saturday—the time period when Japanese TV gets down and dirty—was all about kissing, in fact. It was called *Mizugi de Kissu Me*, or *Kiss Me in a Bathing Suit*, and it featured pretty young women, some wearing only half a bathing suit, who would kiss men while the audience hooted and shouted. Real life was even wilder than these TV offerings. Japan, after all, has ubiquitous, if illegal, prostitution and a thriving pornography business. Even in relatively mainstream publications, pictures of naked women are so common that United Airlines had to ban some Japanese newsmagazines from

its planes because of passenger complaints. Japanese video-rental stores offer rack after rack of "adult" films, including countless videos purporting to show high school girls stripping out of their sailor-suit school uniforms. There are stores where men can buy used lingerie packaged with a photo of the high school girl who reputedly wore it. That's something that really qualifies as disgusting, but for some reason, it was the innocent public kiss that drew a storm of angry reaction.

Obviously, this kind of demonstration of affection is not supposed to be carried out where others can see it. The Japanese are extremely decorous on this point. When you greet an old friend, business partner, spouse, or lover, you're supposed to do it with a polite bow. In 1991, when Saddam Hussein released several dozen Japanese people he had been holding as hostages in Iraq, I went to the airport to watch the joyful homecoming. The pattern was the same for each of the former prisoners: A man would step onto the tarmac, his business associates, wife, and children would step out to welcome him home, and then everybody would bow. There were no hugs, no handshakes, no bodily contact, and certainly no kisses to welcome these people home after a month's captivity in a distant jail. Since the homecoming was taking place at an airport, full of passengers and reporters like me who had come out to watch, restraint was required.

The problem with kissing in public, according to its many critics, was that it demonstrated a lack of restraint—a lack of shame. And if people no longer restrain themselves in public, even in something as simple as kissing, the whole society may soon go to pot. Confucius knew this, of course: "Guide them with edicts, keep them in line with punishment, and people may stay out of trouble but will have no sense of shame." The kissing-in-public crisis demonstrated that the ordinary people of Japan knew it, too.

A housewife named Tsutsumi Shizue was one of many people who wrote letters to the editor on the kissing crisis to the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, Japan's biggest daily newspaper. "These young people have lost their sense of shame," her letter said. "Without shame, there is no sense of restraint. If we lose that, we're no different from animals." The other problem was that the kissing couples didn't seem to care whether their public display of affection bothered anybody else. The

social critic Aso Chiaki complained: "These people never give a thought to how others feel, the people who have to see them kiss."

I'm pleased to report that the so-called trend for kissing in public died away about as quickly it blossomed. Today, you still won't see many kisses in Japan, unless you tune in to *Kiss Me in a Bathing Suit* late some Saturday night. The interesting thing was the way the whole society seemed to agree that kissing in public had overstepped some unstated social limit, and that this was not to be tolerated.

Whether it's a stolen kiss or some more serious transgression, people in East Asian societies know what the rules are—even the unwritten rules—and feel obliged to follow them. Which means that all those ceremonies, signs, banners, posters, ads, and exhortations that color daily life in Asian countries are doing the job they are supposed to do. The public has developed the sense of shame that Confucius cared so much about. But there are other forces at work in Asian societies that strengthen the general sense of civility. Along with that sense of shame, there is also a sense of belonging, a broad consensus that maintaining social order is in everybody's interest.

Each citizen has been made to feel that he is a stakeholder in the overall economy and social structure. And to a large extent, this feeling is accurate. As the nations of East Asia have grown prosperous over the years, they have done an excellent job of spreading that prosperity to every member of society. This is a significant social achievement—one that we ran into the day we went swimming at an indoor beach.